



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

What is Hansen's disease (HD)?

HD is commonly known as leprosy. HD is caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae* and affects the skin, eyes, throat, mouth, and the nerves. People with HD often develop flat, discolored, patches or growths on their skin. If left untreated, permanent disfigurement and disability can occur. Cases of HD are well documented in history and still occur today, but HD is rare in the United States.

What are the symptoms of HD?

Symptoms of HD may include:

- Discolored patches of skin
- Growths (nodules) on the skin
- Thick, dry, or stiff skin
- Numbness on parts of the skin that are affected
- Muscle weaknesses, especially in the hands or feet
- Stuffy nose or nosebleeds
- Enlarged nerves
- Eye problems

Symptoms of HD typically do not appear until many years after exposure to an infected person.

How is HD spread?

The bacteria that cause HD are thought to be spread through repeated contact with nose or throat droplets of an infected person over a long period of time. Almost

95% of the world's population is naturally immune and would not get sick if exposed to the bacteria.

Who is at risk for HD?

Persons at greatest risk for HD are family members or household contacts of a case who is not receiving treatment.

Most cases in the United States occur in immigrants and refugees who got the disease in their native country. HD is more common in temperate, tropical, and subtropical climates, with the largest number of cases in Southeast Asia, Brazil, and Central Africa. In the United States, most cases are detected in residents of Arkansas, California, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, New York, and Texas.

How do I know if I have HD?

Your healthcare provider can diagnose HD by a biopsy of the skin showing a rash. A small sample of skin will be collected and sent to a laboratory to see if the bacteria that cause HD can be detected.

How is HD treated?

HD is treated with multiple antibiotics, usually taken for one to two years. Usually, the infected person will no longer be able to spread the disease after taking only a few doses of the medication.

How is HD prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of HD is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. Current household contacts of someone with HD should be examined immediately by a healthcare provider and then each year for five years following their last contact with the infectious patient. Close contacts of people with HD do not need to receive antibiotics if they have no symptoms.

There is no vaccine available to prevent HD.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website on HD:

<http://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/>

This page was last reviewed June 25, 2019.